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Gene Truax Oral History

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Michael Huisman

Student Interviewer's Name: Michael Huisman
Interviewee name Allen Truax

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in 2 sessions on November 3 and 4, 2015 and lasted approximately 47 minutes. It was conducted in the Hulsey Wellness Center on the campus of Southern Adventist University. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Allen Truax:

Allen Eugene Truax was born in Taylorsville, Kentucky in 1930 and lived most of his life moving to different places throughout the United States. He was in the Navy for 20 years. During his time in the Navy he prepared soldiers who were going to fight in the Korean War and was stationed off the coast of Cuba during the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Allen received high marks in many different training schools in the Navy, including Aviation Electronic School and Training to be in the Frogman program. He then retired from the Navy as a Master Chief Petty Officer, and later retired from the federal government as a GS-13, which is near the top of the pay-scale in Civil Service. Allen has two children and is married to Ella Mae Truax in 1949. He currently lives in Apison, TN. This interview covers topics from the Korean War, to the Cuban Missile Crisis. This Interview was conducted at the Hulsey Wellness Center in Collegedale Tennessee on November 4, 2015.

Interviewer: Michael Huisman (MH)

Interviewee: Allen Truax (AT)

MH: Thank you for doing this interview today Mr. Truax, just to let you know I'm going to start asking these in chronological order, so first off I just want to ask where you were born?

AT: Where?

MH: Yes, where you were born.

AT: I was born in a little town called Taylorsville, Kentucky.

MH: Is that western or eastern Kentucky?

AT: It's about uh twenty-five miles south of Louisville. So that would be Central mostly.

MH: And what year was that?

AT: 1930.

MH: Ok, did you live there for a long time?

AT: Well my folks moved during the depression years for a lot of reasons, we had uh, which took us up to 1939, so for nine years I moved around a lot, let's see. I know you have time constraints but....

MH: No you go ahead.

AT: I can count one, two, three, four, five places that I lived in that nine years.

MH: Wow, that's quite a bit. So what did you do for education then?

AT: I uh, I'm not proud of my educational achievements. I uh dropped out of high school in the middle of the second year, and I later went on to retire from the federal government. I'm retired from the Navy as a master chief, paygrade E-9. Then I retired from the federal government as a GS-13 which I was very thankful for. So my education and everything I did I had to get the hard way. I spent a lot of midnight oil accomplishing things I would not have had to if I had completed my education. So I encourage and I have served on the..... Highland View Academy board, and as you know I served here at OAKS (Ooltewah Adventist Elementary School) as the... chairman of the board there. So I've been very very strong on education. Spent a lot of money in this institution on grandkids, well my own daughter, she graduated from here in 19...hmmm... 1972 I believe, not quite sure. Anyway...

MH: So your own daughter, where was she born?

AT: In Newport Rhode Island, I was in the Navy when she was born.

MH: What age were you then?

AT: I would have been twenty.... I married very young... I would've been twenty-two.

MH: What age were you when you were married?

AT: Nineteen I believe...

MH: So you enlisted at seventeen, is that when it was?

AT: Yes sir.

MH: And where were you living at the time?

AT: When I enlisted? In Kentucky, at the same place.

MH: Ok, so where did you go to Enlist?

AT: Louisville

MH: Ok and did you choose the Navy?

AT: I did, I did, I had a lot of my friends, and I always hung out with an older crowd. Might be expected since I was not in school, and several of my friends were in the service, mostly the Navy. I was very partial to the Navy and I had a good friend in fact that was lost on a submarine in the Pacific late in WWII and so... (Trails off)... I'll tell you a sidebar story later, but anyway. I did I chose the Navy and I had a brother in law that was in the navy he was in WWII and he encouraged me that if I was going to serve it made sense to me, if you were aboard a ship you got 'three hots and a cot' you didn't eat with those gravel crunchers who were eating out of a can, I mean we had hot meals.

MH: True! Gotcha (laughs). So this was a couple years after WWII and it was prior to the beginning of the Korean war so what is it exactly that made you choose to enlist?

AT: Ahh, well the economy was not real good, I guess and I was a great...I loved geography and I loved history and I wanted to join the Navy and see the world and that's exactly what happened, I wanted to see the other side of the mountain.

MH: (Laughs) Very cool. So when you enlisted where was the first place you went?

AT: To Great Lakes, Illinois for boot camp

MH: And how long did that last?

AT: Four months, sixteen weeks, it used to be a lot longer back then than it is here in recent years as I understand. When you got out of there you were physically and mentally and culturally and emotionally in pretty good shape.

MH: Yes absolutely, and what was boot camp like? Was it a tough experience for you personally?

AT: It was, even though I was used to working hard and used to tough conditions it was a little extra tough. You didn't question anything; you did exactly as you were told. And um I made the sad mistake on the first night at Great Lakes there were three guys from Louisville that went in with me and we hadn't been there at Great Lakes probably an hour and we were temporarily assigned the Barracks, and we hadn't been issued anything yet. So the chief came in and said okay you guys take a shower, and they did give us one towel. And the water was cold; this was all preplanned of course. It was cool. But we got a shower, it was less than an hour later that another chief came in and he was grumpy looking, red headed, freckled, and he was like you know "hey I want all you boots to line up here, I want you to strip down and go take a shower" If anybody were shy you get over that in a hurry cause you know you hang the shyness on the door knob. Well I made the very sad mistake of getting close to him and saying but chief you know we just had a shower, and he said "I didn't ask you if you'd had a shower did I?", with some flavorful language, "besides its not chief, its sir." I learned real quick.

MH: First impression there was pretty good huh? (laughs)

AT: Yeah real good (chuckles) so we got a second shower that was just as cold as the previous one. But that was a good learning experience; it brought me down a peg. I thought I knew everything. Anyways..

MH: So where was the first place you went after that after boot camp?

AT: Corpus Crispy, Texas.(chuckles lightly)

MH: And did you get on a ship right away?

AT: No I went to school, aviation electronic school, and even though I had had high marks, test marks, when I went in, there were a lot of the mass basics that I really had never had. And Corpus Christi was hot, it had no air conditioning, if you were forcing yourself you could get fairly close to one of the overhead fans. I realized that there was a lot of math there that I just wouldn't like, but I studied I did and I worked hard and I learned a lot, but I decided that I wanted to get to the fleet I

didn't want to fool around with more schooling cause that was what was ahead of me. Technical schooling and I really wasn't prepared so I withdrew actually during that time that I was in Corpus Crispi and the school moved to Memphis, Tennessee. And then we moved up there in the coldest winter and oh it was miserable. No heat in the barracks to speak of, lot of cold showers still. And I just needed to get to the fleet. I needed to get, so I withdrew and left there and went to Charleston, SC to await order, cause that was like a replacement depot. And I got order then to the U.S.S *Mississippi* headed off from Virginia, but that was a flagship. By then I mean I was going to the admiral staff on board the *Mississippi*. And that was the old BB41 it was an old ship that had been converted to a, what we really did, It was a lot of experimental work that went on on board the ship. So I stayed there till um oh gracious let's see... I go in there for a few months and I got a what they call a 'fleet appointment' to the Naval Academy. Well I went to the navy prep school at Bainbridge, Maryland and there again I had had good test marks and I was interviewed and recommended I leave for the course. When I got to Bainbridge, there was a a prep school for the Naval Academy and um, It was what I got the accelerated course, and it helped but I could see right then that I was still very short of the mass requirements and another thing, this was right after WWII and the Naval Academy was known as all of the academies were for being very, well, I don't know of a good term to use here but, if you were a fairly mature person, you didn't fit in that well there, because the upper classmen constantly harassed the lower class and I had some friends for example who had been in WWII, couple of fellas had been on Iwo Jima, and when they went on the firing range at the academy, they were verbally abused and they even had some physical altercations so they left, we don't need this blankity blank treatment here cause we're here to learn, of course they don't realize that that's part of the discipline and the learning. You never question, and that was a hard for some of us. I thought I was too mature for that, but that's a long story I know you're getting a lot of verbiage here that you'll have to sort through... but anyway I was there at the prep school and while the school was there it moved to Newport, Rhode Island, so I was a transit from birth on. At Newport we were only there for two years and moved backed to Bainbridge if you believe it, they spent a lot of money moving me.

MH: Yeah, they sure did (laughs)

AT: Meanwhile I got married, and my daughter was born there in Newport and as then I was back to Bainbridge where I got orders to, while I was there let's see... '51... Korea had kicked off but because I was married I got a deferment on transferring. So they took all the single guys first, sorry about that (chuckles), they took them first and shipped them off on the first increment to Korea, and then I was at Bainbridge for most of the next year and then I got orders to the U.S.S *Lake Champlain* carrier it was the recommissioning detail in Norfolk, the ship had been mothballed right after WWII and they brought it out for Korea. It was a shakedown crew where we took the ship to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for all of the different exercises to train people. It was everything from aviation, engineering, navigation. Everything it took to run the ship to get prepared to go to Korea. My dad had

passed away and I had an opportunity to go to Kentucky when he died but couldn't even stay for the funeral cause I had to go to Norfolk because we were going to ship out to Korea, by God's providence I got orders instead of staying on the *Lake Champlain*, I got orders to another carrier, the '*Block Island*' which was headed to the Atlantic and then the North Atlantic and we were slated to go to England for the Queen's what is the word, not inaugurated, I even have a cup with the word on it.... (He called me back the next day with cup in hand and told me that the word he was looking for was 'Coronated')...The admiral that I later worked for was a four star admiral, Len McCormick, who was one of the delegations involved in a lot of the ceremonies and he was there representing the United States but the final course the president went for the crowning. So I left there and we went back to the States on the *Block Island*, and while I was on the *Block Island* I got orders to Greece. I went to Athens Greece but I went by way of the naval intelligence in the Pentagon for training, I served there for two and a half years. Then I went from there back to the sixth fleet aboard the cruiser *Little Rock* and went back to Bainbridge for a temporary assignment and got orders to Turkey.... Wait a minute... I'm off kilter... I got orders to England and that was working in Naval intelligence again, which was a forerunner of NCIS, and I worked there two years then orders to go back to the sixth fleet again and this time I went to the cruiser *Canberra*, and we spent time there and back in Boston, went to the cruiser *Boston*. Somewhere in between was the Cuban Missile Crisis.

MH: So that was '62 correct?

AT: Yeah, I went from Turkey to San Diego, then San Diego I was there two and a half years and then moved to Maryland where I finally retired. I was at the Naval Ordnance station on the Potomac below Washington D.C. and I could have stayed but Vietnam, it wasn't that I was worried about going to that area, because I knew I would be aboard a ship, I was not trained as a Seal team member or anything so it wouldn't have been all that bad except for one thing. The politics, the politics of Vietnam I decided it wasn't for me, I was reenlisted as an officer at Indian Head and I was the command master chief, we had the explosive disposal school, we were frog men who had been trained in disarming bombs or anything that might be an explosive. That was a rigid six months course and they had every foreign type instrument there that they trained on. For example they could go into, they could get a Turkish bomb and they knew exactly how it was made and how to disarm it, so that was very rigid for six months, and I enjoyed that, I really did. The fact that I could sneak out every evening and play golf wasn't bad either (laughs) but one of my collateral duties was to try and convince young folks to reenlist. And I got to realizing that I was not convinced that this was the right thing because I didn't believe in it myself. I didn't believe in the politics, of course later it proved that McNamara who was secretary of defense at the time, wrote that it was the worst mistake that the country ever made getting into Vietnam. I didn't think of it as being a cowardly way, I just didn't want anything to do with it. I was fine with Korea, there were people there who we desperately needed to help save their hides

from North Korea and China, but Vietnam it wasn't clear. But anyway I'll let you ask some questions.

MH: Did you believe you were going to Korea, and were you afraid that that might be the case?

AT: No actually I kind of resented the fact that I got pulled off the ship and got sent to another ship to go to operate with the British Navy in the North Atlantic and operated out of Ireland. Which I have lots of interesting pictures in LIFE magazine. One of our planes went into the water and the helicopter picked the pilot up and they had him probably thirty, forty feet above the water and his shoot popped, (laughs) and when his shoot popped they had to cut him loose because the helicopter was struggling to get altitude, so they dropped him back in the water and a motor whale boat, which was a small boat off of the destroyer that was the escort, it went over and picked him up and brought him to the *Block Island*. One little interesting side bit there, anytime a destroyer saved one of the aviators, for ransom when they brought him over to the ship they got five gallons of ice cream. (laughs for an extended period) because they never had ice cream on those small ships, so anyway.. You know you gotta have a little humor as you go through life.

MH: So what happened to your friends that you enlisted with?

AT: Well I lost track of them one of them, we went to the Great Lakes together, one of them went aboard a destroyer while the other one I lost track of. He wasn't a communicator and I wasn't, you know, pushing him.

MH: I've read that the Navy played a crucial role in national defense during the Cuban missile crisis. Where were you during the 13 days of the Cuban Missile crisis? What were the emotions like on the ship you were on?

AT: I was on the admiral staff, and we were on the cruiser *Little Rock* and it was a very tense time. We didn't know from one minute to the next, for example there was a Russian Trawler that shadowed us, we were keeping track of them and they were keeping track of us. We really didn't know for several hours when we stopped a merchant ship that was loaded with weapons for Cuba, we didn't know what the outcome was gonna be from that. Had no idea if we were going to start the Nuclear war right there, and there was something that just came to light in recent years that was hardly known, wasn't known at the time except at the very highest level of secrecy, but John Kennedy was in direct contact with Krushchev.

MH: I did read about that last night actually,

AT: Did you? They communicated and Kennedy was able to convince him that there wouldn't be a good outcome if they didn't back off. Did you really read that last night?

MH: Sure did! So how much news were you receiving during the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

AT: Being on the Admiral Staff I was privy to a lot of information but even then, most of it was contained right in the White House, the secretary of defense and his staff were at the White house making decisions there. The word we had was to hang on, don't blink, because we don't know where we are going with this. And fortunately the Admiral I served with, Admiral F. T. Williamson, he was quite a hero in WWII, and a Navy Cross holder. He was not the type to blink, so that was a good thing, he was seasoned and he knew how to get the job done.

MH: So you were in the Atlantic?

AT: Yes sir.

MH: Were you close to Cuba?

AT: Yeah we were probably twenty-five miles of the shore of Cuba.

MH: So when did you receive word that it had been resolved?

AT: Well when we saw the ships turn around, we still stayed on station for another two or three weeks.

MH: Were you relieved when you heard that it was over?

AT: Yes it sure was a good thing to hear?

MH: Did you ever fear for your life during those thirteen days?

AT: Not really, I guess you really have the sense that you have a job to do and you will do your job. I wasn't necessarily a religious person back then. I believed in what we were doing though. Now I guess I honestly say that I never had any fear. Reservations maybe (laughs). I tell you what Michael, this may give me a little perspective, I never, because I wasn't living a Christian life, but I may go back to my ship after spending a lot of time after the bar and I would always pray. My prayer was not for me but please God, look after my family. That was just the perspective I had, now the day I left we were not religious people. I was raised as a Baptist, but my grandad never went to church, and as country people it wasn't that easy to get there. But the day I left to go to the Navy, the 29th of March 1947, my mother made me kneel down and have prayer, and that impressed me. That stayed with me a long time. She just said God I'm turning him over to you. At the time I thought, God you sure have a big job, but anyway...

MH: So after twenty years in the Navy, what did you do when it was over?

AT: Well I went to work for the social security administration for seventeen years. It was a challenge, but I was blessed there too.

MH: So looking back would you do it all over again?

AT: Oh yes, the only thing I would do different is get a little more formal education.

MH: Well Mr. Truax, thank you for doing this interview with me.